

This week in history: May 19-25

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25 years ago: Political upheaval in Argentina

On May 21, 1989, the president of Argentina, Raul Alfonsín, after the defeat of his Radical Civic Union at the polls the previous week, agreed to move up the inauguration date of his successor. Carlos Saul Menem, the overwhelming victor in the elections, became the first Peronist president elected since the overthrow of the regime of Isabel Peron in the 1976 military coup. The Peronist party also gained the majority of both houses of the National Assembly.

In the weeks leading up to the elections, Argentina's inflation rate reached the catastrophic level of 8,000 percent a year. On April 28, 1989, a bank holiday was declared because of a shortage of banknotes. Some consumer goods and medicines had disappeared from shelves because suppliers were unable to set prices. The country's foreign debt had reached \$60 billion and the government had fallen \$3 billion in arrears on payments.

Financial markets became even more unstable after the elections due to the uncertainty of the leadership transition which would last until the official inauguration date of December 10.

Alfonsín withdrew his announcement of an earlier end to his government early the very next day when Menem refused to agree to the anti-inflation measures of the existing government, including what he called "higher public service charges, higher taxes and other measures that we have been rejecting consistently," adding, "There is no pressure on the part of Justicialism (Peronism) for the early handover of the government."

Two days later Alfonsín swore in a new economy minister to replace an economic staff that had resigned en masse a month earlier. The new minister, Jesus Rodriguez, was committed to further austerity measures.

Although Menem's electoral victory was fueled by popular opposition to Alfonsín's amnesty for the "dirty war" military leaders, and economic austerity policies, his populist rhetoric disguised an equally right-wing economic program that presented no alternative.

50 years ago: Goldwater proposes atomic bombing in Vietnam

Speaking on the ABC news and radio program "Issues and Answers" on May 24, 1964, the leading Republican presidential candidate for the 1964 election, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, proposed that atomic bombs might be used to defoliate South Vietnam so that National Liberation Front rebels against the US-puppet regime in Saigon could not hide in the country's jungles. Goldwater also proposed the bombing of bridges and roads in North Vietnam and the People's Republic of China used to transport munitions to the NLF.

Goldwater criticized the Johnson administration for its alleged passivity in Vietnam, claiming that a "defensive war is never won." When asked how guerrilla paths in the forests could be spotted—they were invisible from the air—Goldwater responded, "There have been several suggestions made. I don't think we would use any of them. But defoliation of the forests by low-yield atomic weapons could well be done."

Goldwater's position, however reckless and dangerous, was well within the framework of ongoing debates within the US ruling elite. Johnson's predecessor, John F. Kennedy, had risked a nuclear war with the USSR in 1962 over the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba—while angering a powerful faction in the military brass because he did not push closer to the brink.

Kennedy and Johnson had steadily ramped up the murderous American war in Vietnam, including the introduction of a massive chemical defoliation campaign using the notorious Agent Orange. Defoliation of the forest was based on the mistaken assumption that the problem bedeviling US forces was that they could not "see the enemy." In reality the enemy was virtually the entire population of the country.

Goldwater's frontrunner status in the nominating process marked a new stage in the shift to the right within the Republican Party and the entire American ruling class that had begun at the onset of World War II and had accelerated with the anti-communist postwar purges in the trade unions, Hollywood, academia, and government. He would go on to win the Republican nomination, but was beaten in a landslide by

Johnson in the general election.

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75 years ago: Hitler informs German military of war plans

During this week in 1939, Nazi Germany traveled further down the road towards waging “total war.” Confident that rapprochement with Stalin over the dismemberment of Poland was increasingly certain, Hitler secured Mussolini’s signature on an aggressive and expansionist military alliance between Italy and Germany entitled “The Pact of Steel,” on May 22, 1939.

With his best troops and equipment depleted by their front-line role in the Spanish civil war and occupation of Albania, Mussolini signed the pact with Hitler claiming privately to believe it secured fascist Italy a three-year hiatus for rearmament before its allies waged aggressive war.

However, the very next day, May 23, 1939, Hitler revealed to the leadership of the German military plans for impending war, first with Poland and then France and Britain. He summoned the senior Army, Air Force, and Navy officers to his study in the Reich Chancellery. Among those present were Göring, head of the Luftwaffe, Generals Keitel, Brauchitsch and Halder, and Admiral Raeder.

Hitler began by telling his audience how “*Lebensraum*,” German expansion eastwards across Eurasia, was necessary to overcome Germany’s protracted economic crisis. He dismissed the pretense that the ongoing tension with Poland merely involved the control of a Baltic port. “Danzig is not the object of our activities,” Hitler told his audience. “It is a question of expanding our living space in the east, of securing our food supplies, and of settling the Baltic problem. ... There is no question of sparing Poland and we are left with the decision: To attack Poland at the first suitable opportunity.”

Should Britain declare war over the German invasion of Poland, this would threaten the crucial Ruhr region. Netherlands and Belgium must quickly be defeated, followed by France, so the German Navy and Air Force could cut off Britain’s food supplies. Drawing lessons from the German defeat in the First World War, Hitler argued for an initial wheeling movement to seize the ports along the English Channel, rather than a direct strike towards Paris. “The aim” he concluded, “will always be to force England to her knees.”

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100 years ago: Irish Home Rule passed by the UK’s House of Commons

On May 25, 1914, the Irish Home Rule bill, also known as the Government of Ireland Act 1914, was passed in the British House of Commons with 351 votes in favor and 274 against.

The struggle for Home Rule emerged during the 19th century in Ireland in opposition to the Act of the Union of 1800, which had merged the separate kingdoms of Ireland and Great Britain in 1801. The aim of Home Rule was a degree of national autonomy and self-government for Ireland. Beginning In the 1870s the struggle for Home Rule was closely identified with the Irish parliamentary party, led by the bourgeois politician Charles Parnell. The party dominated Irish political life and grew in electoral strength.

Two previous Home Rule bills introduced by Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone had been rejected: the first by the House of Commons in 1886 and the second by the House of Lords in 1893.

The Third Home Rule bill was introduced by Liberal British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith in 1912. It allowed for a bicameral Irish parliament to be established in Dublin, for Irish MPs to continue to sit in the imperial parliament in London and for abolition of Dublin Castle, the center of government in Ireland under British rule. The House of Commons passed the bill, but it was again rejected in the House of Lords, whose members had vested economic interests in keeping Ireland under British rule. Ulster Unionists also opposed Home Rule for similar reasons. They formed local militias, and in September 1912 half a million signed the Ulster Covenant, pledging to defy Home Rule by all means possible.

The third reading of the Home Rule bill produced similar results in 1914, but this time the Liberal Government utilized the provisions of the Parliament Act overriding the Lords and sent it for Royal Assent. To avoid civil war, Asquith compromised with Unionists and Lords by excluding six counties in northeast Ulster from Irish home rule, which would remain governed by Westminster. This move provided the basis for partition and the sectarian conflicts that it would foster, and underscored the absence of any constituency within the British ruling class for genuine Irish independence.

The bill was postponed for 12 months with the outbreak of World War I and superseded in 1920 by a Fourth Home Rule bill, which partitioned Ireland between the six northern counties and the main part of the island, today’s Republic of Ireland.

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